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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether school board members give highest priority to representing their constituencies or to voting their consciences. It also looked for correlations between demographic characteristics and the way school board members respond to constituent interests. Data were gathered by a questionnaire submitted to the population of 110 school board members in Rutland County, Vermont, in 1979. A Q-sort was administered reflecting the continuum of attitudes from most responsive to constituents to least responsive. Findings showed no overwhelming preference for either end of the role continuum. There was some indication that respondents preferred statements reflecting a desire to remain independent in their attitudes, yet willing to listen to constituents. No demographic characteristics (age, sex, educational level or length of time on the school board) appeared to have any significant influence on choice of statements. (Author/JM)

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CONSTITUENT RESPONSIVENESS OF SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

by

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EA 013 121

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School Board members - do you really represent the people who elected you? Concerning issues effecting school policy, do you vote your conscience or are you dictated to by the will of your constituency? It was just such a curiosity that prompted the following study: to determine to what degree, if at all, elected school board members are directly responsive to the people who elected them.

The problem is set in an historical context and not without controversy. The role of the elected official in the democratic system has been debated for centuries.[1] Two schools of thought, from among many, emerge as predominant. Towards one extreme are those people who maintain an elected official is mandated to vote and act in a like manner as those who elected him. In essence, he is a "stand-in" for all those he represents who are not able to be there in person. Representation carries with it the concept of direct responsiveness to one's constituency.

The opposing viewpoint is characterized by freedom of conscience. The proponents of this theory maintain that once duly elected, the official must act and vote as his conscience dictates. If such action is in keeping with constituent desires, it is coincidental, not obligatory. Constituent access to the elected official comes at the next popular election.

Between both extremes lies a continuum of opinions that combine aspects of both sides of the controversy. The nature of a democracy acknowledges legitimacy of both positions, as well as those

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in between. Although the debate continues, a resolution is not in the foreseeable future.[2]

It is in the context of this historical debate that the present study was undertaken. Where on this continuum of representational roles do elected school board members locate themselves? Do they see themselves as making individual judgements based on their own analysis of the issues independent of constituent desires? Do they see themselves as being directly responsive to meeting the expectations of their constituency even if they disagree with the collective constituent opinion? There is always the option, of course, of choosing a middle ground reflective of both sides.

Simply to know how school board members act is less important than understanding why they act as they do. Toward this end, the study also considered certain demographic factors. Included was a study of individual school board member's age, sex, education and length of tenure on the board. Do any of these personal characteristics carry any significant influence that might determine why school board members respond as they do to constituent interests?

Our source of information was gathered somewhat reluctantly from the population of school board members in Rutland county, Vermont during the 1979 year. The population is comprised of approximately 110 elected school board members representing districts with as many as 4,500 students and as few as 100 students.

A unique data gathering instrument known as a Q-sort along with a simple questionnaire asking for age, sex, educational level and length of time on the board was sent to all 110 school board members in the county. The basic material of a Q-sort consists of a set of cards (60-100), each with a specific statement printed on it. Each statement reflects an attitude consistent with one of the two extreme positions of representational responsiveness, as well as moderating or in-between positions. The entire set of cards attempts to reflect attitudes of constituent responsiveness as revealed by an extensive review of related literature.[3] It was the intent of the statements to reflect the entire continuum of attitudes from those representing the most responsive (Mandate) to those least responsive (Delegate). Attitudes between the two extremes were catagorized as those leaning more toward the mandate (Mandate-Delegate) and those leaning more towards the delegate (Delegate-Mandate). By sorting all 60 of the cards into rank orders of agree-disagree, like-dislike, etc., the assumption of the study is that each school board member responding self-selects his own position relevant to the mandate-delegate controversy and reveals his personal attitudes toward the question of constituent responsiveness.

A few examples of statements reflective of various positions helps to reveal the continuum of attitudes available in the Q-sort selection process.

DELEGATE

A school board member should not use his own independent judgement as a criteria for making school board decisions, but rather the opinion of the people he represents.

School board members are elected to represent the public, so they should be sure to follow the preferences of the majority of the public they represent.

DELEGATE-MANDATE

The role of the school board member is to have a clear notion of the community wishes and expectations concerning educational matters.

It is the responsibility of the school board members to act as the pulse of the community; that is, to make decisions based on their understanding of what the community values and wants in education.

MANDATE-DELEGATE

A school board member should make decisions based on what he thinks is best for the community, even if it is not what they want.

School board members must retain a freedom of judgement so that when new evidence is gained, they are not bound to any previous commitments toward constituents.

MANDATE

School board members are, on the whole, better informed and more qualified concerning educational issues because of interest and experience than is the general public; hence they should be speaking to the public rather than listening to them.

Once a school board member is elected, he must be completely free to act in accordance with his own best judgement.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study, if not conclusive, were consistent. School board members responding to the study showed no over-whelming preference for either end of the representative role continuum. A majority of respondants indicated a preference for the mandate-delegate category. This category indicates that although school board members choose a middle or moderating position, they lean toward the mandate extreme. Those responding preferred statements reflecting a desire to remain independent in their attitudes yet not wishing to divorce themselves entirely from their constituency. In other words, as reflected in their rank ordering of available statements, school board members indicated a desire to know what constituents are thinking and a willingness to listen while adamently retaining their right to remain uncommited and independent.

In the rank order selection process, the following five statements were among those chosen most frequently:

1) Membership on the school board is a public trust.

2) A school board member is to make judgements, provide leadership, exercise responsibility: that is why he is elected.

3) Board members should increase, not decrease, communication with the public.

4) Public opinion should be used as one element in school board decision making, but not the only element.

5) School board members must retain a freedom of judgement so that when new evidence is gained, they are not bound to any previous commitments toward constituents.

Regarding demographic characteristics, neither the age, the sex, the educational level nor the length of time serving on the board had any significant influence on the individual school board member's choice of statements. Among age group categories, those 40 years of age or younger choose indentical or similar statements with those over 40 years of age. In the same manner, sex preferences were indistinguishable for both male and female respondants chosen from among independent leaning categories. All five of the most preferred statements of college graduates were the same as those with little or no college education and were chosen from among the independent leaning categories. The same is true of school board members serving less than three years and those with many years experience. Of significance to the study is that from among all demographic characteristics, the statement chosen first was identical for all respondants. School board members seem to perceive their role as best described by the "trustee" model of representation.

IMPLICATIONS

Although the clear choice of school board members is to remain uncommited toward constituent interests and independent in their responsiveness, this does not mean that they are unresponsive. There is no necessary connection between independency and non-responsiveness. It is very possible that an attitude of independency carries with it a strong sense of responsibility. It is at this very point that the study becomes least informative and non-conclusive.

It is very likely that when any decision is made contrary to constituents' desires, it is done so only with the best intentions of serving the public's interest. The findings of the study reveal nothing to the contrary. Rather, it can only be concluded that a preference is shown for the independent leaning positions regarding direct responsiveness to constituents interests by school board members.

It is interesting to note, however, that while the category of mandate-delegate was most preferred, it was also least preferred. This is to say, that those responding to the study selected statements from the mandate-delegate category as least preferred, as well as most preferred. There is a consistency, however, revealed in this choice. The mandate-delegate category is characterized by two important factors: (1) it represents the desire by school board members of wanting to know what constituents are thinking as well as a willingness to listen (2) without the requirement of agreement and commitment. All of the statements in the mandate-delegate category reflect these two characteristics.

When any statement allowed for a "sense" of independency, it was preferred: when it called for total independency, however, it was rejected. In short, the category of mandate-delegate provided for limited or conditional independency; that is: the attitude of making oneself available to constituents and expressing a willingness to listen, while not being required to respond in any direct manner.

Hence, mandate-delegate categories were preferred. The mandate-delegate category, however, also carries with it a sense of non-responsiveness which is an attitude that school board members choose to reject. Hence, the mandate-delegate category was also least preferred. The essence of their choices reflects a middle ground between total and unequivical independency and total direct responsiveness.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Although the study concludes that the factors of age, sex, education and length of time serving on the board are not significant factors affecting school board members' attitudes toward constituent responsiveness, this does not indicate that other demographic or socio-economic variables might very much affect attitudes. While eliminating the above, it would seem very important and fruitful for further research to determine what factors, if any, are influential. To know what these factors are might enable the public to predict how particular school board members would react to constituents' interests. The significance of this information would be most important at election time in choosing candidates who exhibit characteristics compatible with constituent responsiveness.

Related to the above consideration is the question of access by the public to the decision making process of school board policy and program. The implications of the study are that public access is curtailed by virtue of the independent attitudes of school board

members. They are willing to listen, but do not see the necessity of directly responding to constituents' demands. If the public is intent, however, on effective school board policy, such action needs to formulate itself in some direction other than reliance upon school board members to respond positively to public directiveness. Further research concerned with discovering what socio-economic or demographic variables do, in fact, affect attitudes or school board members could conceivably provide the public or any special interests group with the necessary tools toward enabling access to decision making processes.

Further research might also give credibility to such studies as those of Zeigler, Tucker and Wilson in which the authors suggest that we are presently in the midst of a new era of school board responsiveness; one which is on the brink of ushering in a complete separation between local school board and the public.[4] Because of the continual intervention of state and federal mandates in the operation of public education, the ability of the school board to be responsive to the public may soon be past history. The alternative, as suggested by Zeigler, is that the public must intervene on its own behalf and "wrest from the government" the control over public education. Only by closely monitoring the attitudes of school board members toward constituent responsiveness as the subject of continued research will we be able to decipher toward which extreme school

boards are being directed.

It cannot be stated conclusively whether school board members are or are not responsive to the wishes of their constituents. Rather, the findings indicate both a desire to be responsive while remaining uncommited and independent. The role of the school board member toward constituent responsiveness is perhaps best characterized by the "trustee" model; one which maintains no direct commitment to the public except to act in the public's best interests. The decision of what is in the "public's best interest," however, remains the prerogative of the elected school board member.

1. Hanna F. Pilkin, The Concept of Representation (Berkeley; University of California, (1967).

2. John A. Fairlee, "The Native of Political Representation I," American Political Service Review, XXXIV (April - June, 1940) · pp 236-48.

3. William D. Brook and Phillip Emmett, Methods of Research in Communication (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970), see page 168-178.

4. Harmon L. Zeigler and others, "How School Control Was Wrested From the People," Phi Delta Kappa (March, 1977), pp 534-39.